

MITCHELL Colin P.
*New Perspectives on Safavid Iran:
 Empire and Society,*

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Dedicated to Roger M. Savory, a doyen of Safavid studies, the festschrift under review is organized into introduction and two parts. The first part consists of six contributions that deal with a wide range of topics from letter decoration arts and political practices of *möchlägä* or “binding pledge” and corporate sovereignty to the Safavid-Ottoman wars in the Caucasus, cultural currents in the early modern Turco-Persian world, and the issue of hijab at the Safavid royal harem.

In her article entitled “The binding pledge (*möchlägä*): A Chinggisid practice and its survival in Safavid Iran,” Maria E. Subtelny explores the origins of the *möchlägä* or unilateral pledge of allegiance made by influential statesmen and provincial elites to the Mongol and Ilkhanid rulers. Though it has almost nothing to do with the Safavids, Subtelny’s engaging and insightful study of the *möchlägä* in Ilkhanid Iran outlines the evolution of the practice as a form of imprecatory oath of loyalty by which the pledger “called punishment or death upon himself if he did not carry out his promise or if the statements he made were not true.” She concludes that in its Central Asian context the practice of *möchlägä* was aimed to nip in the bud civil wars and inter-tribal conflicts, but so far as the post-Ilkhanid political order in Iran is concerned, such a unilateral pledge of political allegiance no longer had effectiveness in repressing the fissiparous dynamics of *a’yān-amīr* power relations in provinces (p. 20).

Iraj Afshar’s contribution is a short research note on a scribal handbook entitled *Majmū’a nāmāh-yi ‘ahd-i Šafavī* (MS 5032, Majlis Library, Tehran) that dates from the latter part of the 17th century. The handbook in question contains transcripts of several royal letters (*manshūrs*) drafted and sent by Shah ‘Abbās I and his immediate successors to the Mughal emperors of India and the Uzbek khans of Urganj. The letters included in this handbook are mostly reproduced partially and a number of them come with short notes specifying the format, size, and decorations of each letter in its original version. Afshar organizes these short notes into seven categories to shed new light on the “taxonomy of the procedures and organizing principles involved in writing, ordering, and dispatching Safavid correspondence” (p. 31).

The chapter contributed by Colin P. Mitchell contextualizes the way in which the Ottoman prince Bayezid’s flight to Safavid Iran and his subsequent murder at the hands of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent’s envoys outside Qazvin on 21 Dhū’l-Qa‘da 969/2 August 1562 shaped the Safavids’ perception of the Turco-Mongol practice of corporate sovereignty. Mitchell’s central contention is that the trends and events culminating in prince Bayezid’s escape and death had an invigorating impact on the Safavid discourse and practice of non-partible rule and primogeniture-based order of succession which were compatible with the “older, pre-Islamic traditions which had been revived and articulated during the great Perso-Islamic renaissance of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.” He concludes that the “Bayezid episode and the whole phenomenon of royal fratricide was a distasteful, if no repulsive, byproduct of a system which encouraged political decentralization. For the Safavids and their own centralizing ambitions, the ancient pre-Islamic model of divine kingship — suitably attired in Shi’ite Islamic grab — was deemed much more appealing” (p. 52).

Carl M. Kortepeter’s contribution to the festschrift under review explores the history of territorial rivalries between the Safavids, the Ottoman Empire, and Muscovy in the Caucasus under Shāh ‘Abbās (1587–1629) and Shāh Šafi (1629–42). Emphasis is given to the way in which the internal power struggles and economic interests of each of these three regional superpowers shaped their intervention in the Caucasus. Kortepeter draws our attention to the failure of the Safavids to enter a military alliance with the Russians against the Ottomans, ascribing it to Shāh ‘Abbās’ concerns about Muscovy’s southward territorial expansionism and increasing meddling in the internal affairs of Dagestan. The Ottoman Empire and Muscovy Russians leveraged their Girayid and Cossack proxies in Crimea and the Black Sea basin preemptively to ease their strained relations and form an alliance that was centered on the Caucasus. It was under these circumstances that “the Safavids, after the death of Shāh ‘Abbās, look upon any Russian political activity in the Caucasus as contrary to their interests” (p. 77).

John Perry’s article revolves around a selection of instances of West-to-East cultural transmission across the Turco-Persian zone. The linguistic interplay of Turkish and Persian in Safavid Iran as manifested in Shi’ite traditions, performance culture, and popular literature is the underlying theme of Perry’s contribution. Perry emphasizes the ethnolinguistic hybridity of the Safavid dynasty and its sociopolitical structure, concluding that while the Safavids “set the tone of

Iran's national character," they acted as "a post-medieval and pre-modern culture-broker" (p. 93).

As it is the case with a number of his other contributions to modern scholarship in Safavid history, Rudi Matthee's article, entitled "From the battlefield to the harem: Did women's seclusion increase from early to late Safavid times?" is basically driven by a series of ahistorical either/or propositions. Matthee's contribution to the volume under review draws almost exclusively on European travelogues and secondary literature dismissing the wealth of information in Persian narrative sources, from court chronicles to local histories and biographical dictionaries of poets. In the conclusion, however, he comes to the conclusion that "a more complex picture" of women's role in public life in Safavid Iran, noting that "We should be careful ... not to confuse veiling with an inferior position or even associate it with curtailment" (p. 110–11).

The closing part of the festschrift under review deals with visual culture in Safavid Iran. Lisa Golombek's contribution studies and contextualizes the motif of matchlock hunt on a number of Safavid bottles based primarily on a bottle in the Royal Ontario Museum. She emphasizes the transition from cultural and psychological constraints on hunting on foot with firearms in early Safavid Iran to the prevalence of matchlock hunt and desirability of the theme as reflected in the popularity of the objects bearing it under the later Safavids (p. 140–141).

The chapter contributed by Ali Asghar Bakhtiar is an account of the Maydān-i Shāh in Isfahan in the opening years of the 20th century based on his personal reminiscences. The chapter provides us with interesting details about this urban hallmark during the decades that followed the barbaric destruction of more than fifty Safavid-era monuments and public buildings in Isfahan at the hands of the Qajār prince Mas'ūd Mīrzā Zill al-Sulṭān (d. 1918).

Charles Melville's article, "The illustration of history in Safavid manuscript painting," sheds new light on the numerical decline and dominant features of manuscript painting in pre-Safavid Persian universal histories and Safavid dynastic and universal histories illustrated and "published" in the 16th and 17th century. He concludes that under the Safavids "The illustration of books may not have been perceived as an effective way to project a state ideology that became increasingly engaged in religious and spiritual debate" and that "pictures of young dandies, pairs of lovers, or venerable dervishes with beardless youths," which are dominant features of manuscript painting under the later Safavids, point to the 17th- and 18th- century Persian painters' interest in "the realities of contemporary society" (p. 185–186).

The chapter contributed by Paul Losensky is devoted to the development of the *mādda tārikh* in the Safavid period with special reference to architectural chronogram-poems composed by Muḥtasham Kāshānī, 'Alī Naqī Kamara'ī, Vā'iz Qazvīnī, and Najīb Kāshānī. He concludes that these architectural chronogram-poems foreground the thorough integration of poetry into the material and public culture of the Safavid period and that they put on display the essential features of high literature with its emphasis on "archetypal scenes, structures, and images, whether they are describing the public gathering at a bathhouse, the monumentality of a shrine, or the communal intimacy of a private home" (p. 213).

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